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CULTURE AT DINNER

BY STARK YOUNG

It was early twilight just before the dinner hour when I went into the garden and saw him there. He was standing by the wall, with one hand resting on it, looking out across the Fontebranda at the Duomo, whose black and white spaces now were buried in shadow and golden light. He was a young man, twenty perhaps, almost tall, fair, with a white, sensitive face that had long been beautiful with an intense ideal of living. I could see that as I stood in the doorway looking at him. And I could see also a hint of confusion somewhere about the eyes, a kind of glorious blur, a touch of the vagueness that might be in the face of a sort of academic young saint. He looked strong, athletic; but one of those strong Anglo-Saxon bodies that any fine dream can blow away. Plato, Francis Thompson, I figured, and perhaps the choruses of Aeschylus, would be his favorite reading.

He told me, when we fell into a conversation, that he had finished college, Yale, great old place, that spring. And now traveling? Yes, with rather a definite purpose. He had felt the limitations of his education; he felt that he needed more horizon. That he had talked and studied and been lectured to about so many things that were still all in his head and meant nothing as a part of his real development. He wanted an international quality added to what he had. Not so much study and art perhaps, but seeing people, social contacts. And to see the things of Europe through the eyes of people, of men and women. And so he thought it would be a good thing to come to a pension like this, where he might be on more direct terms with a group of people that hailed from all parts of the world. In a hotel it might take longer or never happen. He meant to visit in this way a number of pensions.

He had what he meant clear at least. I stood there listening

with a sinking heart, for I was going over the list of guests who sat at our board just then. Perhaps this young seeker after culture had his own vision that he had brought with him and was ready to throw it over anything. But in case he had not, what then? The people who were to be at the table began to pass before me in the light of those young eyes I looked into.

The best of the lot was Signorina dell'Orto, and even at that my young friend would have to learn to know her. She was a new note ahead of him, that was true, but he would have to stretch for it. Signorina dell'Orto was a short little woman of fifty, who wore a short plain skirt, a man's collar and coat and cravat, and pulled her hair straight back. After meals in the drawing-room she smoked a cheroot. She was very intelligent, and had been the tutor for the Czarina and for German and aristocratic families for twenty years before the war. She had been interned in Italy for a year on account of her free speech on the subject of the Allies. And for a Florentine she was unusually abrupt.

With her was her friend, a Miss Holtz, of twenty years' standing, as Miss Holtz loved to say, very German, long, tall, with prominent teeth. Between forty and fifty. Musical, rather maidenly, and flat.

At the head of the table sat a New York artist, with clear sharp features and white hair, alert, cool, like a cameo steeped in vinegar. Besides her were two Englishwomen in shirt waists who never said anything. Next to them came the young scion of a very old Roman house, but though he dressed very smartly, he had at the time a cracked head in a bandage, where a *Socialista* had hit him with a stone during the last riot. He too said nothing, but ate in silence. At the Roman's right sat Miss Ross from Birmingham, who ate almost nothing but biscuits which she brought with her to the table. She was one of those English daughters who have been slaves to noble, aged fathers; but he was dead now and she was left with an income, a dozen photographs of him, and several rings that he had given her on occasions. If she had been a little less simple and dull and crochety one might have blamed the father more for having blotted her out so completely. But she was a gentle creature who was al-

ways trying to divide her English jam and tea with someone whether it was wanted or not. There was besides an Italian doctor who was about to marry, and who had such strict views on the position of women that he had engaged an extra room upstairs where he and his wife were to dine apart from the men at the table. He believed on the whole in the harem system more or less, and said that women should be locked in, which enraged the New York artist and the English ladies to outbursts that were fortunately beyond their supply of Italian.

And finally, all the way round the table, at the artist's left, came Professor and Mrs. Jurden, from one of the two great universities of England. Professor Jurden was a very tall man, sallow, and very hesitant in his speech. He spoke so slowly in fact that his wife used to tap him on the back to get him through it, in spite of his saying always, "Darling, how often have I asked you not to do that?" He had served in India in some sort of forestry work, and during the war in South France hospitals, where he had won a number of small bronze medals, but had completely ruined his health. He spoke in a smothered voice with very impure vowels, and always as if his teeth were sagging and he feared to lose them if he left off holding down his upper lip. His wife was tall, thin, and wore her hair with a front of curls. She spoke in a voice that she considered to be very soft and elegant, though as a matter of fact it had lost all its bottom tone and sounded all breath. She and her husband disapproved of Italian cooking, exactly as they regarded Italians as cheats and liars, and went in for a vegetarian diet. At every meal she appeared at the table bringing cheese and a quantity of green stuff, lettuce, parsley, cress and so on. Outside their rooms I used to see sometimes in the morning a waste paper basket filled with strange leaves and stalks for the maid to carry away, as if they kept asses or goats privately in their quarters, or were some secret creatures that browsed at night on plants and herbs.

I passed these guests of the pension through my mind in review as I stood listening to that boy from Yale with his beautiful face and fine dreams. I wondered what the dinner might be as I thought of what it had too often been.

A long golden shaft of light was falling on the wall of the room

when we took our seats at the table. It struck the old faded walls and touched the yellow hair of the new-comer, who had been assigned a place between Miss Ross and the Roman. But the golden sunbeam proved no good augury, as I had hoped; for the dinner began impossibly from the first course. Spinach and eggs, but not enough of it. There was never quite enough of anything, which was the incentive that kept us all exact in our knowledge of what everyone there ate. The artist, out of pure vexation at the sight of the small quantity of food, took twice as much as she wanted. The Roman when his turn came emptied the dish. Was there more? Mrs. Jurden asked. Maria, the maid, who was stupid and afraid of her mistress too, said that she did not know. Complaints arose. Maria returned with another platter one-fourth full. She brought a dish of sliced salami to patch out. Dell'Orto said scathing things, for she knew the padrona's wiles. To change the tone of the occasion, for my countryman's sake, I asked Professor Jurden how his Italian lessons were coming.

"But I am not taking lessons," he replied. "My wife is having them. I have a method I have devised for myself."

"What is that?" I asked, for I was having strenuous discipline under a priest, the author of a grammar.

"I am translating Shakespeare into Italian. I figure that way I'll get a good vocabulary as well as learning the language in my own way."

"To begin with Shakespeare without knowing any Italian!" I exclaimed, astonished. I asked only, "And are you putting it into verse also?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, are you trying to reproduce the verse of the original?"

Professor Jurden looked at me puzzled for a moment. His wife tapped his back.

"Darling, I asked you not to do that. Why, is the original in verse?" he asked, turning to me.

"Why, yes," I answered, "how do you mean?" I thought that there must be something that I had missed in his question.

"I didn't know that Shakespeare's plays were in verse."

"But of course not *all* of it is in verse," I helped out, like a

foolish, good American; "a good many of the speeches are in prose."

"Ah, that's probably why I never noticed it."

I looked at my idealist; he kept his eyes on his plate.

"I find Italian exceedingly easy," Mrs. Jurden observed; "I regard my progress as most encouraging."

At this the Signorina dell'Orto, who hated the Jurdens, turned to them. She understood some English but could not speak a word.

"*Cosa dice?*" she asked encouragingly.

Mrs. Jurden undertook to put into Italian her ideas about the easy progress one made in the language. Her remarks were, in the main, pauses and incredible mistakes, but the Signorina was able to gather the general idea. Her face flushed red.

"Oh yes," she began in a great, man's voice, "the Italians will tell you that you are speaking very well. Don't believe them. I am always bored at these lies. A foreigner murders our language, but an Italian will say, 'Ah, you speak very well; you speak very well.'" She imitated the tone. "Well, I don't do it, I assure you. You just let an Italian go to England or Germany and you'll see. If he tries to ask a question in English they're so stupid they don't understand a word of it. They just look and say Baa, like fools." The Signorina made a sound like a sheep and twisted her head to one side. "Italians are too polite. It makes me furious."

"What a temper they have!" Mrs. Jurden said to the New Yorker.

"Well," I thought, with my young dreamer in my heart, "he is learning. So much for cosmopolitan culture and politeness."

The Signorina dell'Orto was cooling somewhat now, for Mrs. Jurden began to make conciliations and to smile down from under that front of faded curls, but the Signorina had not yet finished what she had to say.

"The difficulty in English is the pronunciation, which is so unintelligent. There is no way of learning it except as one does in a nursery, by hearing it. No rules, no anything but individual cases. How does one use one's mind in such an affair? And the grammar, well, it's simple enough for a child in arms. Italian

has a grammar. Difficult, yes; but intelligent. It demands intelligence to create and to use Italian grammar. You have no grammar in English."

Miss Ross looked up with no little asperity, for her.

"I'm sure I don't know what she means by that," she said sharply, "I had a very good grammar."

The nature of this remark was so weak that even Mrs. Jurden saw it. A silence fell and lasted through the salad. Finally the New York artist, to improve the quality of the occasion, spoke to the young man.

"I'm sure you will find many delightful walks around Siena," she said. "Only this morning I was at San Francesco. The altar piece there is very interesting."

"I expect to find Siena very interesting," he replied in a conventional tone.

"And," Miss Ross added, gently, "there are two charming walks, one near Fontebranda and one toward Girasole. They are quite my favorites. I always take them. They are so like English lanes. Really Italy is lovely, isn't it?"

I had no wish to look into the eyes of the Yale lad; but I stole a glance as we rose from the table. He was smiling bravely, trying to find his way through this new cosmopolitan world that he had been dreaming such fine things about. The Signorina had taken out her cheroot and led the way to the drawing-room. I lingered a moment over my Vin Santo and then stole away up the little side stair to my room.

Through the closed shutters I could see the boy standing again by the wall. His hand rested on it and his face was turned toward the Cathedral, on which one last light rested now, at the very top. I had not enough courage to join him. But I stood there hoping that he was one of those impenetrable idealists on whom the world makes no dents, who are never willing to believe that the actual can be true. Still the fact remained that the international culture at that dinner-table had been rather actual. But, I thought, with Francis Thompson in my mind, the chambers in the house of dreams are filled with so divine an air that it would be a pity for these moths, however cosmopolitan, to get in. Or at least the first lesson might have been less stringent and whole-

sale. *L'idéal n'est que la vérité à distance*, I knew from Lamartine. But how far? At how far distant must the ideal be?

But as I stood there with my head against the shutter, meditating, I saw Mrs. Jurden appear and engage him in conversation.

"Look, just look, do you see?" she said. "The light on the Duomo, how charming it is. I should call it yellow, would you? No, not exactly yellow. Well, orange. A sort of greyish orange. There, just at the top, do you see? How romantic Italy is! Are you going to stay long? Of course one longs for England. But we must have the change of climate. Look, do you see? I can't say I like the stripes in the Duomo, do you?"

Mrs. Jurden had fallen into that particular brand of scenic monologue that English ladies sometimes indulge. I saw the face of the boy turned quietly toward the Cathedral above the shadows of the Fontebranda. He was getting architecture through her eyes.

STARK YOUNG.